Walt Whitman: The Poem as Private History. By GRAHAM CLARKE. Pp. 176 (Critical Studies Series). London: Vision Press; New York: St Martin's Press, 1991. £19·95.

Suddenly and without warning, in the middle of 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry', Whitman interrupts his description of the crossing to speak in an extremely personal way about himself:

> The best I had done seem'd to me blank and suspicious,
> My great thoughts as I supposed them, were they not in reality meagre? . . .
> I am he who knew what it was to be evil,
> I too knotted the old knot of contrariety,
> Blabb'd, blush'd, resented, lied, stole, grudg'd,
> Had guile, anger, lust, hot wishes I dared not speak,
> Was wayward, vain, greedy, shallow, shy, cowardly, malignant,
> The wolf, the snake, the hog, not wanting in me,
> The cheating look, the frivolous word, the adulterous wish, not wanting,
> Refusals, hates, postponements, meanness, laziness, none of these wanting . . .

Without self-pity or apology he enumerates his vices and weaknesses so as to make them (and himself) appear thoroughly disagreeable, unpleasant—and human, and he goes on to speak about his homoerotic feelings. Whitman gives the impression of meeting the worst of himself head-on and of keeping nothing back. This section is in sharp contrast with what comes before and after, and completely changes the character of the poem, altering the nature of the identity that Whitman affirms with the passengers on the ferry and adding a new dimension, that of the inner world.

Similarly, in 'As I Ebb'd with the Ocean of Life' the poet declares:

> O baffled, balk'd, bent to the very earth,
> Oppress'd with myself that I have dared to open my mouth,
> Aware now that amid all that blab whose echoes recoil upon me I have not once had the least idea who or what I am,
> But that before all my arrogant poems the real Me stands yet untouch'd, untold, altogether unreach'd, . . .
>
> I perceive I have not really understood anything, not a single object, and that no man ever can, . . .

This is Whitman's nadir. He confesses his total incapacity, negating 'Song of Myself' and all his other work, and what he is himself: 'I too but signify at the utmost a little wash'd up drift.' The whole poem is an attempt to come to terms with this feeling of meaninglessness. Again, the language is strong, pungent, and unambiguous. Again, Whitman faces the worst with a dispassionate ruthlessness.

For Graham Clarke (who cites neither of these poems) such passages represent 'a wholly different identity' from most of Whitman's poetry, what Clarke calls 'a private history of the poet'. Clarke argues that in Whitman 'the subject of the poetry is always Whitman as ideal representative of his ideal America' and that this private, historical self is 'covered over', 'hidden by surface glaze and gloss', and although 'held in suspension', 'eats away', 'threatens to erupt' and 'invariably splits open . . . to reveal a "hidden" Whitman' (pp. 16–17). This thesis is disproved by the evidence, by passages such as those cited above and by the poems such as 'There Was a Child Went Forth' and 'The Sleepers' (which Clarke examines) where Whitman deliberately sets out his troubled feelings.

Clarke's technique is to set one part of a poem against another part, to call one public, ideal, and mythic, the other, private, historical, and problematic. For him the first is a mask, the second, the hidden depths, of which Whitman is alleged to be more

or less unaware and which he is struggling to suppress. After a sensitive analysis of the description of the father in 'There Was a Child Went Forth', Clarke states: 'The positive aspects emerge in Whitman's own image of the ideal poet . . . , but the disruptive elements emerge from memory. Once again the myth confronts the history' (p. 40). The more obvious explanation, that Whitman's father like most fathers had both good and bad qualities, that Whitman like many sons both loved and hated his father—the hatred strengthening the idealization—and that in the poem Whitman consciously, with great art and intelligence, shows us his divided feelings, is rejected. Another difficulty in Clarke's argument is that statements about history need to be based on historical evidence. Although most critics accept that the portrait of the father in 'There Was a Child Went Forth' is an accurate one, so little is known about Whitman's father that this is a conjecture almost entirely dependent upon how *Leaves of Grass* is read.

Clarke's title implies a comparison of the poems with the available biographical material in an attempt to establish the nature of Whitman's private history. This is a promise that is not kept. There is a good chapter on Whitman's catastrophic family and (following Zweig) some wonderfully apt citations and sharp commentary on the early stories, as well as some excellent quotations from the family letters to show their neurotic and pathological aspect and how painful this might have been for Whitman. This is, however, as far as he goes. For the rest of the book, Clarke identifies Whitman's actual experience on the basis of his sense of the text rather than on any evidence outside the poems, and four of the seven chapters digress from the main argument and go off in different directions.

There is no question but that Whitman's poetry has a dark side, that it is full, among other things, of contradictions, tensions, and mixed feelings, but this is something of which everyone who has read *Leaves of Grass* carefully is aware and it is the place to begin rather than end a study of Whitman. A 'lonely old grubber' he may have been, and certainly, as with the rest of us, there were things about himself that he preferred not to think about; none the less, for all his subterfuges and evasions, it is a gross distortion not to give him full credit for the power of his self-scrutiny. Montaigne and Rousseau may be his equals, but I cannot think of another author who faces up to himself with greater honesty and openness.

One of the strengths of the book is its wide range of reference. Whitman is constantly being put in his larger historical context and compared to both his American and his European contemporaries. There are some interesting pages comparing Poe's 'The Sleeper' with Whitman's 'The Sleepers' and excellent use is made of Dickens's *American Notes*.

University of Fribourg ROBERT REHDER

Visions of the People: Industrial England and the Question of Class, 1840–1914. By PATRICK JOYCE. Pp. xiv+450. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. £30.

Patrick Joyce argues that historians of nineteenth-century industrial England have often used the concept of 'class' as a trans-historical narrative from which all interpretation is to be derived. Joyce wishes, not to discard class, but to disavow its privileged status. He analyses the various concepts by which contemporaries articulated their social order; for instance: 'the nation', 'labour', and 'the people'. For Joyce, social conflict has been over-emphasized by historians. He argues that shared moral concerns underpinned a view of capital and labour as interdependent, and effectively bound the social order. Instead of hailing the progress towards a single, united working class, Joyce traces the development of regionally and occupationally distinctive working classes.